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SUBJECT: Presidential Election Preview

1. Sensitive but unclassified. Please protect accordingly.

2. (SBU) Summary. Presidential elections will be held April 3, with a runoff on April 17 between the two leading candidates if needed. Although the official campaign is the two-week period before elections, several candidates are already posting billboards and distributing literature with general messages. Key individuals have yet to declare their candidacy, but now that the election has been formally announced, they have just 21 days to act. End summary.

What's at Stake

3. (SBU) Slovakia's President, as head of state, has significant diplomatic responsibilities. His opinion, expressed through public speeches and interactions with other politicians, carries significant weight. He also appoints and recalls government officials approved by Parliament. He can also veto laws, but the veto is relatively easily to overcome with 76 members (50 percent plus one) of Parliament. Thus, his actual political power is quite limited. This election will not necessarily serve as a midterm barometer of attitudes toward Parliament or the ruling coalition, as not all parties have presidential candidates, and the election is much more about individual personalities than about party politics.

The Rules of the Game

4. (SBU) Speaker of Parliament Pavol Hrusovsky made the official announcement of presidential elections on January 18. Individuals now have to announce their candidacy within 21 days. Official campaigns may only take place in the two weeks prior to the election. Elections will be held April 3, with a runoff on April 17 if needed. A runoff occurs when no presidential candidate gains a majority of the votes. Comment: With a crowded field, we fully expect there will be a second round.

5. (U) In order to be eligible to run, candidates must collect either the support of 15 MPs or 15,000 voters' signatures. About a dozen individuals have met the requirements well in advance. Many of these have essentially started campaigning, giving speeches and, in the case of Foreign Minister Eduard Kukan and ANO candidate Lubomir Roman, posting billboards with general messages like "Happy New Year."

Leading Contenders. and Non-Contenders

6. (SBU) President Schuster's term ends June 15. His popularity has fallen significantly over the nearly four years since his election. He has publicly stated that family will be the deciding factor in whether he runs for reelection, and his wife strongly prefers he not do so. However, he told emboff January 10 he would run, and his most recent public speeches (December 5 State of the Nation and New Year's Day) took a populist stance that would be a strong campaign platform.

7. (SBU) HZDS Chairman Vladimir Meciar, another popular would-be candidate, has also not announced whether he will run. Meciar has been very cagey in the press when discussing his intentions. Meciar probably is struggling to balance his desire to be back in the national spotlight with the strong possibility that he would be defeated for a second time. In the run-up to Parliamentary elections in September 2002, Meciar was very sensitive to questions about his finances and past actions as Prime Minister, even punching a reporter on television who asked about how he paid for Villa Elektra (his home that was refurbished at a cost far exceeding what he could have afforded on a state salary). Meciar may be hesitant to come under such scrutiny again. There is no other clear leader within HZDS who could be a strong candidate. If Meciar does not run, support may fall to Ivan Gasparovic of the breakaway HZD party. Gasparovic has the support of other former HZDS members now in the "People's Union" party led by Vojtech Tkac, and of the Jan Slota branch of the ultra-nationalist Slovak National Party.

18. (U) Kukan, the official SDKU candidate, was the front-runner in the first poll in early December and is now slightly behind Meciar. His supporters have been distributing door hangers, sponsoring billboards, holding numerous functions for supporters and publishing a large glossy biographical book about himself - all in general terms so as to avoid being called "campaigning."

19. (SBU) Former Ambassador to the U.S. Martin Butora, while running as an independent candidate, may peel off votes from SDKU's dwindling pool of center-right voters, as would not-yet-candidate SDKU breakaway leader and Free Forum founder Ivan Simko.

Preliminary Polls

10. (U) Following is a list of both official and unannounced candidates and party affiliations along with their latest polling results from the MVK agency:

- Vladimir Meciar (HZDS), 20.1 percent
- Eduard Kukan (SDKU), 19.3 percent
- Ivan Gasparovic (HZD), 15.6 percent
- Rudolf Schuster (President), 10.3 percent
- Martin Butora (no party affiliation, 15,000 signature requirement in lieu of party support), 6.9 percent
- Lubomir Roman (ANO), 6.3 percent
- Frantisek Miklosko (KDH), 4.2 percent

Announced candidates Jan Kralik of SDL; Jozef Prokes of SNS2; former State Secretary of Foreign Affairs under Meciar Jozef Sestak; Martin Mayor Stanislav Bernat; Roma and NGO-supported candidate Mikulas Horvath; artist Elena Schoppertova; German resident of Slovak origin Vojtech Czobor; Swiss resident Julius Kubik; and former deputy Prime Minister Jozef Kalman, did not receive statistically significant support.

Comment

11. (SBU) Comment. Schuster and Meciar are the wild cards at present. Results may be significantly different if neither throws his hat into the ring. Center-right foes of Meciar almost hope he runs, as he would almost certainly lose in a second round. Schuster would likely beat Meciar in a runoff because people know what to expect from Schuster both domestically and in the foreign policy arena. If Meciar doesn't run, Gasparovic and the nationalist extremists could see their numbers soar.

THAYER

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